

Dear Whitney Museum of American Art,

We are Arts & Labor, a working group founded in conjunction with the New York General Assembly for #occupywallstreet. We are artists and interns, writers and educators, art handlers and designers, administrators, curators, assistants, and students dedicated to exposing and rectifying economic inequalities and exploitative working conditions in our fields through direct action and educational initiatives. We are writing to call for an end to the Whitney Biennial in 2014.

Biennials were born in the nineteenth century, in an era when many nations were young and wished to showcase their greatest cultural products and achievements. The Whitney annuals grew out of this, championed by the patron and sculptor Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, in a period when American art had little critical or financial support.

Much has changed since the founding of the Whitney Studio in 1914 and the advent of the current biennial format in 1973. The absorption of contemporary art into museums, the rise of a speculative art market, and the need for artists to obtain advanced degrees to participate in the current system have changed how art is produced and exhibited.

We object to the biennial in its current form because it upholds a system that benefits collectors, trustees, and corporations at the expense of art workers. The biennial perpetuates the myth that art functions like other professional careers and that selection and participation in the exhibition, for which artists themselves are not compensated, will secure a sustainable vocation. This fallacy encourages many young artists to incur debt from which they will never be free and supports a culture industry and financial and cultural institutions that profit from their labors and financial servitude.

The Whitney Museum, with its system of wealthy trustees and ties to the real estate industry perpetuates a model in which culture enhances the city and benefits the 1% of our society while driving others into financial distress. This is embodied both in the biennial's sponsorship – represented most egregiously in its sponsorship by Sotheby's, which has locked out its unionized art handlers – and the museum's imminent move to the Meat Packing District, a neighborhood where artists once lived and worked which is now a gentrified tourist destination that serves the interests of the real estate industry.

We therefore call upon the Whitney in its centennial year to end the biennial and to support the interests of art workers over the capital interests of its trustees and corporate sponsors. As the Declaration of the Occupation of New York City states, "We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments." Art institutions have come to mirror that ethos. We therefore call upon the Whitney to terminate its collusion with this system of injustice and use its resources to imagine sustainable models of creativity and culture that are accessible not just to Americans but to people around the globe.

Sincerely,
Arts & Labor